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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the unprecedented U.S. need for individuals with highly developed competencies in English and one or more other languages and the untapped language resource: heritage language speakers. Sections address the range of proficiencies of heritage language speakers, the fragility of heritage languages, the limitations of current heritage language programs, deficits in the infrastructure of heritage language instruction, and the Heritage Language Initiative. (JL)

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ERIC Digest

Tapping a National Resource: Heritage Languages in the United States

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Tapping a National Resource: Heritage Languages in the United States

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The United States has an unprecedented need for individuals with highly developed competencies in English and one or more other languages. Because the United States interacts with virtually every nation in the world, and because U.S. society includes individuals and communities from many of those nations, the need for proficiency in their languages for use in social, economic, and geopolitical areas has never been higher. More than 150 non-English languages are used in the United States, and many of them are taught in its colleges and universities. However, to develop the high level of bilingual skill required for professional purposes can require many years and far more hours of instruction than a typical college curriculum provides.

When we look to the formal education system, generally expected to meet the nation's language needs, we find both quantitative and qualitative shortcomings. Relatively few U.S. students receive long-term, articulated instruction in any foreign language in their pre-K-12 education. Even at the university level, the number of graduates with professional-level bilingual skills is quite limited. For example, although enrollments in Spanish have grown rapidly, the supply of college students who graduate with professional-level skills in Spanish is inadequate to meet the huge demand. In many less commonly taught languages, graduate programs produce only handfuls of speakers with any level of proficiency at all.

As a nation, we have placed little value on foreign language skills, and the formal education system is not attuned to developing language skills for professional purposes (other than language teaching). It is for these reasons that the nation needs a strategy for developing an important, but largely untapped, reservoir of linguistic competence—heritage language speakers—the millions of immigrants who are proficient in English and have skills in other languages that were developed at home, in schools in their country of origin, or in language programs developed by their heritage communities within the United States.

Range of Proficiencies

Although the range of proficiencies of heritage language speakers varies widely, individuals who have regularly used a heritage language with family and friends since birth typically possess language skills that would require nonnative speakers of that language hundreds of hours of instruction to acquire, e.g., native pronunciation and fluency, command of a wide range of syntactic structures, extensive vocabulary, and familiarity with implicit cultural norms essential to effective language use (Valdés, 1997). Even though heritage language speakers also frequently lack some of the language skills and knowledge required in a professional context (e.g., literacy or the ability to use more formal language registers), their "head start" is substantial, making the cost in instructional time and dollars required to bring them to professional levels of competence significantly less than the cost for individuals without home

language experience. This is especially true for the less commonly taught languages and for the many strategically important languages almost never taught in elementary and high school and available at only a small number of colleges and universities.

Given the real and growing needs for professional-level language skills in the United States, why are our heritage language resources going untapped? The problem has several interrelated components: First, the inherent fragility of heritage languages; second, the limitations of current programs, within both the heritage communities and the formal education system, to maintain and develop heritage language capacity effectively; and third, underlying deficits in the information, interaction and dialogue, research, and national infrastructure necessary to increase the effectiveness of these institutions.

Fragility of Heritage Languages

Heritage languages, absent active intervention or new immigration, are lost over time both in the individuals who once spoke them and in the immigrant community, and typically die out within three generations. Language dominance among immigrant families in the United States shifts toward English in well-established, predictable patterns: Children arriving in the United States are generally English dominant by the time they reach adulthood; children born in the United States to first-generation immigrant families move quickly to English dominance with the onset of schooling if not sooner; and the third generation of children are not only native speakers of English but have usually lost much of their expressive ability in their heritage language. Systematic heritage language programs that include formal instruction in the written language, standard or prestige usage, and technical or professional domains are necessary to maintain heritage languages at professionally useful levels of knowledge and skill.

Limitations of Current Programs

In the United States, there are two potential sources of effective programs: the heritage communities themselves, through their various cultural institutions; and the formal education system, including public schools, community colleges, and universities.

Community-Based Institutions. Some ethnic communities in the United States have well-developed weekend or evening schools offering study of their heritage languages (see Wang, 1996). Those ethnic groups with little recent immigration are likely to provide mostly cultural programs with limited substantive language content. For many groups, however, including most Hispanic cultures, heritage language schools have not been part of their community structure in the United States. Where such schools exist, they generally face substantial obstacles in supporting language learning. Most often, their teachers and administrators are volunteers and, while often highly educated, are not trained language teachers. 3

Appropriate materials are scarce. Funding, teacher training, instructional materials, and administrative infrastructure are all problematic. Moreover, students entering high school often rebel against time spent in heritage school programs, where they do not receive credit, which reduces the time available to do the work required by their formal schooling. Efforts to gain formal recognition of learning in heritage schools are ongoing but have had limited success. To address these issues at the systemic level, some ethnic communities have formed national or regional organizations for their heritage language schools.

The Formal Education System. Our educational systems, serving kindergarten through university and adult education, have made only limited progress to date in developing heritage language resources. A 1997 survey conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Branaman & Rhodes, in press) found language classes for native speakers available in only 7% of secondary schools (up from 4% in 1987). In higher education, language programming is overwhelmingly geared to English speakers, even though enrollments in certain less commonly taught languages are dominated by heritage learners. Spanish, as both a traditional, commonly taught language and the nation's most widely spoken heritage language, is consequently the unquestioned leader in the development of specialized programs and learning resources for heritage students. At present, the emerging field of Spanish for native speakers is served by a task force of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, a Special Interest Group of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, an annual conference, a newsletter, a listserv, and a growing body of research and specialized teaching and learning resources. While much work remains to be done in Spanish, including faculty development, specialized assessment tools, and a survey of current programs and practices, the work to date provides a valuable model for other languages.

Pre-K-12 school systems, colleges, universities, and adult education programs are increasingly aware of the language backgrounds of their students. There is clearly a groundswell of interest in heritage language issues, particularly in public universities and community colleges, but individual institutions lack the specific expertise that heritage language development requires in language programming. In addition, they lack systematic means for interfacing with the heritage communities whose value and whose needs they increasingly recognize. Despite significant commonalities of interest and complementarity of resources between formal educational structures and heritage schools, models for articulation and collaboration are in their infancy.

Deficits in Infrastructure

In terms of both heritage communities' capacity to maintain and develop their language, and the capacity of the formal education system to incorporate heritage language development into its programs, there are major systemic needs that, if unaddressed, will perpetuate the under-utilization of this critical intellectual and strategic resource. The most pressing needs are summarized below.

- We need to gather information on heritage languages as a national resource, including ways that other nations have developed and utilized their heritage languages; on the heritage communities in the United States and their social and cultural institutions; and on heritage languages in the official education system (existing programs, curriculum, materials and instructional practices; the number and language profiles of heritage students at all levels).

- We need to conduct research that focuses on heritage language development as a linguistic, social, and cultural phenomenon;

on best practices in the design of programs and curricula; on characteristics of effective teaching strategies, learning resources, and assessment instruments; and on public policies in this and other nations and their implications for national language capacity, heritage communities, and multilingual individuals.

- We need to establish a national infrastructure to develop collaboration, resource sharing, and articulation among the various institutions, organizations, and constituencies with a role in heritage language policy and programming.

The Response: The Heritage Language Initiative

Against this backdrop of increasing interest and need, the National Foreign Language Center and the Center for Applied Linguistics launched the Heritage Language Initiative with the aim of building an education system more responsive to heritage communities and national language needs and capable of producing a broad cadre of citizens able to function professionally in both English and another language.

Objectives of the Heritage Language Initiative.

1. Initiate and support dialogue among policy makers and language practitioners on both the need to address heritage language development and the most effective strategies for doing so.
2. Design and implement heritage language development programming in pre-K-12, community colleges, and college and university settings and foster better articulation among those settings.
3. Provide support in terms of policy, expertise, and resources for heritage community systems wherever they exist, and support their development where they do not.
4. Encourage and support dialogue leading to collaboration, resource sharing, and articulation between formal education systems and the nation's heritage community language schools and programs.
5. Encourage and support research, both theoretical and applied, on heritage language development and on related public policy issues.

Organization and Responsibilities of Constituent Groups. To accomplish these goals, the Initiative will begin to develop a durable infrastructure to support heritage language development policy and practice. This infrastructure will include the following constituent groups: Higher Education Consortium of Universities for Heritage Language Development; National Council of Heritage Language School Systems; Heritage Language Development Research Collaborative; pre-K-12 Heritage Language Network; and Language Expertise Consumers Group. The initiative will be organized and supported by a secretariat, guided by an advisory board of internationally-recognized experts, and coordinated by a council of chairs of the constituent groups.

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